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ABSTRACT

The objective for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) is leadership that grows from excellence. This type of leadership requires that the network serve the diversity of the total population, present programs that develop new approaches to viewers' interests, strive for excellence in craftsmanship, program content, and management, and exercise responsibility in representing the general standards of taste. Attaining this quality of leadership involves identifying the goal and utilizing the skills of the network division heads, the program planning specialists, the news and sports staff, and the management divisions, through the delegation of appropriate responsibility and authority to these divisions. In addition, NBC needs and seeks the confidence and trust of its affiliate stations. Some of the important changes in the program base of NBC over the past year include the mini-series, "Holocaust," unique attempts at daytime programing such as "America Alive," the "Segment 3" that has been added to "Nightly News," the preeminence of the "Today" show, an aggressive sports program that includes the 1980 Olympics, and an effort to build successful program series, broader news, and human interest coverage. (MAI)

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Leadership In Broadcasting

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Remarks by Fred Silverman
President and Chief Executive Officer
National Broadcasting Company
At NBC TV Affiliates Convention
New York City, June 19, 1978

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It's wonderful to be with all of you today—after four-and-a-half months of forced retirement.

All in all, the past several months have been an important period in my life, and they've given me plenty of time to think about television—its strengths and shortcomings, its potentials and responsibilities.

I want talk to you about these things, but first I want to tell you what I found at NBC in joining the company, share my reactions with you and outline the course we've planned for the future. There's been a lot of speculation...and most of it is wrong. So I thought you ought to hear from me on these subjects, at this first opportunity to discuss them with all of you.

I suppose a good place to start is with a definition of our goal

for NBC, what that goal means, and how we are going about realizing it.

My objective for NBC is leadership that grows from excellence. Leadership, however, is a broad term, and in broadcasting it can mean different things to different people, so let me describe what it means to me.

One of the elements—but certainly not the only one—is audience leadership. We are responsible for the operation of a mass medium with a mission to serve the total population in all its diversity. Success in that basic responsibility will reflect itself in sustained audience leadership, which I believe is an important aspect of overall leadership.

If we are to attain something of enduring value, we must present programs that refresh the medium with innovation in substance and style; that develop new approaches to stimulate and meet genuine viewer interests. That requires a willingness to take risks, and to fail on occasion. But these are risks we must take to keep our service fresh and vital.

Leadership also requires the constant striving for excellence in all we do. That includes craftsmanship in writing, production, casting. It also includes attention to program content so that it involves and relates to viewers in a meaningful way, in all the entertainment forms—from serious drama to light comedy. It, of course, means emphasis on news and information, and enterprise in sports. And it also requires a striving for the highest standards in every phase of management—because we are running a business and need to generate revenues that enable us to cover the huge costs and take the huge risks of network broadcasting.

And finally, true leadership requires responsibility—programming that does not violate general standards of taste. We must avoid material that would alienate significant segments of the audience, and we must continue steadfastly to make the difficult and delicate judgments that draw the line between the offensive and the acceptable, under changing public attitudes. For example, our overall prime-time programming is designed primar-

ily for adults, but we must always remember that children are watching, too.

These are elements of the kind of leadership NBC will seek. They do not rely on short-term, artificial rating advantages. They require thoughtful planning of an overall program framework and then moving to fill in that framework, step by step, over a period of time.

That's the first step—identifying the goal. How are we going to move toward that goal? Through the skills, motivation and hard work of talented people. I have now spent 10 days working intensively with the principal executives at NBC. My judgments of them are based on direct personal experience, and I am happy to say that, confirming my expectations, I have found in place—selected by previous management—some of the finest people in broadcasting today.

The heads of the three divisions involved in network programming—Bob Mulholland, head of the Television Network, Les Crystal, head of NBC News

and Chet Simmons, head of NBC Sports—are first-class executives —bright, energetic and creative. They have been in their jobs for less than a year and this is their first Affiliates Convention in their present positions. Yet, in this short period of time, their accomplishments in advancing NBC, in very tangible terms, are most impressive—as you have seen this morning—and just an indication of the progress you can expect in the years ahead.

They have also attracted and brought in a corps of young and able people who will be the NBC leaders of the future. Time doesn't allow me to go through the roster, but the whole area of entertainment program development and supervision in NBC's California headquarters has been revitalized with creative, aggressive specialists in the various program forms. And as far as top programming management is concerned, Variety magazine said it all a couple of weeks ago—NBC now has a team that's the best in the business.

In News, one-third of the total reporting staff and a number of

talented young producers have joined NBC during the past year because News management went out and selected the very best—and because the people they selected recognized NBC News as the place in which they could best work and grow. They represent the cream of their profession.

In Sports, Don Ohlmeyer's superb abilities and reputation have attracted stars like Bruce Jenner and O.J. Simpson on the talent side, and also a hand-picked group of top-flight sports executives and production people. You probably don't even know their names yet, but you certainly will in the coming months and years.

I have great confidence in the NBC operating management and middle-management executives they supervise. And, together with an outstanding staff group who deal with financial, legal, governmental, public relations and personnel matters, they form the people base that is the heart and promise of progress and success. Since many of them are almost as new to you as they are to me, I hope you get a chance to know

and deal with them personally.

For my part, I intend to give the NBC division heads full authority to make the decisions that need to be made in their areas of responsibility, so they can act swiftly and soundly. I expect to set the priorities and direction, to develop the overall goals and philosophy, and to oversee performance. But central to all of this is establishing an atmosphere which encourages the spirit of creativity and the sense of urgency that are already growing at NBC.

Above all, I expect to provide the kind of cohesiveness that keeps the various parts of a complex organization moving together in the same direction—and that direction will always be forward.

I have tried to sketch my feelings about the internal part of the people base on which we will build success. The other part is you—the fine stations affiliated with the Television Network. Your success and our success are interdependent, and your problems and our problems are shared in common, in this uncommon partnership.

We need your confidence and trust and are going to do everything possible to earn them. Where you have problems with the network we intend to meet you more than halfway. For example, your leadership in the Board of Delegates was very forceful in making us aware of the difficulties caused by our sports run-overs.

As an example of our efforts to meet your requirements—as Chet Simmons described this morning—10 weekend basketball games in the first quarter of 1979 will be moved one half-hour or more earlier, which we hope will eliminate the problem of run-overs into your 6 o'clock programs.

You have wanted us to reduce clutter and, as Bob Mulholland has told you, we have taken important first steps in that direction. Those steps make it feasible to provide time each evening for a local news update. It should be as valuable to your audiences as the national news update NBC introduced.

These steps are also tangible examples of decisive action on lingering problems, and that's the

sort of action you can expect from NBC in the future.

I have been dwelling on the people base, because it is the people at NBC that created the program base on which we must build. I believe that the progress of the past year has gone a long way toward establishing that program base. Let me tell you the reasons for that feeling, area by area, with specific examples.

In prime-time entertainment, NBC has made real strides since the beginning of the year. Our second season air-testing was successful in producing programs that will continue into the coming season. "Holocaust" was not only a massive audience success, but became a national phenomenon and one of the most talked about shows in broadcast history. NBC's prime-time performance made a good showing in May, and in the past few months, it has been much closer to first than third. And the revised fall schedule Bob Mulholland outlined this morning will put NBC in the strongest position it has enjoyed in many years. I believe it is a fully competitive schedule, and it is being very

well received by agencies and advertisers.

In early morning and late night, we continue to be far and away the leaders, not only in audience size, but in the kind of audience values that are important and enduring.

In the daytime schedule, major improvements have been made in the morning programming, where NBC had real problems. Audience advances, which typically could have taken several years under the glacial rate of daytime programming, have been accomplished in a few months—a truly remarkable achievement. During the past month, less than one rating point has separated the three networks in daytime audience standings. And we are taking an important forward step in launching "America Alive!" a live program that will be a unique form in network daytime programming.

In working on our daytime schedule, we have wholly revised our program schedule for young people—with special attention to constructive and innovative material. This is a continuing effort for

which NBC has won more recognition and awards than any other network.

In News, "Nightly News" has moved forward with its "Segment 3"—a substantive change that has been so well received by everyone. Also, the pace of the program has been sharpened and the broadcast has been revitalized with new correspondents reporting on a regular basis. We will continue to concentrate on ways of improving its service and style—but always in the context of journalistic integrity.

In this regard, I am delighted that John Chancellor has agreed to stay on as co-anchor for at least another year.

The other part of our news program base—the "Today" show, now in its 27th year—has stood off the challenge of new competition. In recent months, it has reestablished its preeminence in early morning television. Rest assured, "Today" will continue to change and grow, because as a long-standing broadcast institution, it needs to be constantly refreshed to reflect the changing times and audiences.

In Sports, we have the events—the World Series, the Super Bowl, the Rose Bowl, Orange Bowl, NCAA Basketball Championships. NBC Sports is going to be very aggressive in going after every other major event, as it becomes available, to build further on this strong base. A new Sports management introduced a major weekly program in "SportsWorld," and, in its short life, that program has advanced in audience beyond any expectation. It is an outstanding effort produced by the most creative sports organization in television.

That's the program base from which we start, and on which we intend to build. And that building process will be carefully planned, step by step, for the long term, toward defined goals.

In entertainment, we are building toward stability in the program schedule, and it is on that basis that the coming season's schedule is constructed. We will continue the miniseries, specials and events which have given the medium new excitement and added dimension—and which NBC has done so well. But we will

do this on a carefully planned basis, in time periods set aside for that purpose, and integrated in the overall schedule. Needless to say, we will be highly selective in developing this special programming, so that it fits into a total program perspective.

But our basic effort and concentration must be on building successful program series, the most important element in an effective schedule. Thus, we will have the best of both worlds—the stability of series and the excitement of specials and events. Through structuring prime time on a planned basis, we will avoid churning schedules and a last-minute put-out-the-fire approach, which can be so distressing to you and our advertisers.

As we build toward a solid program structure, there will be a continuing effort at innovation. An example is "Lifeline," just added to the schedule in the past week. There has never been a prime-time series like this one—a weekly, non-fiction, dramatic form, using real people instead of actors, dealing with the realities—and the basic human concerns—of life

and death. There were other series in our development effort that would have been safer, more predictable, but you've got to take chances if you're reaching for the quality of leadership we so desire. I urge you to see "Lifeline" when it's screened tomorrow afternoon, for it could indeed be the single show on any network this fall that changes the face of prime-time television.

Turning to News, and looking at its future, we are enlarging its service, not only with "Weekend," which will become part of our regular prime-time schedule, but with more prime-time specials.

You may have heard that with the introduction of a weekly magazine, the day of the hour-long information special is over. Not true. We are announcing today that NBC News will be expanding its activities in prime-time specials and will be averaging at least one a month. They will be a mix of instant specials, topical programs and preplanned specials. An example that comes to mind is the broadcast NBC News presented last Friday night on the taxpayers' revolt.

If NBC News needs prime time, it will get it. Again and again, we've seen people turn first to NBC News in times of emergency. We created that habit in past years and intend to build on it. We can do it best through programs of impact, timeliness and relevance—programs that illuminate complex issues and deal with pressing human concerns.

In Sports, we will also build in an organized way to long-term leadership. As I've said, we are already making excellent progress. Obviously, the Olympics are a centerpiece of our effort, but it would be a mistake to underestimate what NBC Sports will do between now and 1980. That is a period in which our sports operation will be continuously strengthened by acquisition of important events and even further improvement in production values. Our intention is to be the leader in sports before the Olympics go on the air. The Olympics, then, become much more than just a two-week event. They will solidify our leadership position and start a new cycle of growth which extends that leadership throughout the 1980s.

I have been speaking of NBC's resolve to move to leadership within the industry. Beyond that, we must think of the role of all television in our society—its values and shortcomings as a social force.

It is natural that so influential and personal a medium as television should have its detractors, but we should not automatically write them off. Their criticism may be exaggerated and may not fully recognize the positive contributions television has made to American life. Yet there is a basis for criticism of the television medium. It raises questions as to whether television is doing all it can to realize its enormous potential.

These are very complex questions, because the very strengths of a mass medium may also create some shortcomings in the nature of programming designed to engage so broad an audience. Those are the shortcomings we must constantly evaluate and correct. But certainly by understanding and stepping up to the complexities and criticisms,

we will open the way to constructive action.

In addition, we must realize that the constant testing of television will increase in the years ahead. New electronic technologies will seek to win audiences away from commercial broadcasting. New competition for viewers will put an additional premium on our creativity and innovation.

We know that in balance, television has been a great influence for public good. It has operated as a transmission belt of national experience that has carried the country through times of crisis. It has helped unify the nation as a unique national communications medium. It has accelerated social change.

But more will be demanded of it. The complexities of major issues, the bigness of major institutions, the rapid pace of change are becoming overwhelming in human terms. Future shock is everywhere because people everywhere find it hard to make sense out of what is happening to them.

This is a diversified and sectional country, but the nearest thing to a national community is the television audience. Through television, that audience shares a common experience, in entertainment and sports, as well as information programs. We provide a very precious resource to the public and to the nation. We must not squander that resource, and we must earn the trust of the public. Television can enhance the role of the individual in our free society—not smother it.

We can do all this by keeping the level and value of our programming high. It is the creative combination of responsibility and popularity that will make us the genuine leader in broadcasting over the long haul—in business terms, in competitive terms, and in terms of service to our society.

We are embarked on an orderly course of moving, step by step, to achieve that kind of leadership. We have the resources and the resolve to do it, and step by step, we will do it.

I look forward to working with you for a long time to come.